

# Mexico

## Failing State or Emerging Democracy?

Major Juan P. Nava, U.S. Army

IN JANUARY 2009, the retiring director of the Central Intelligence Agency, General Michael Hayden, described the increasing violence in Mexico along the nearly 2,000-mile long U.S. southern border as greater than Iraq and on par with Iran as the greatest potential threat to U.S. national security in the future.<sup>1</sup> *The Joint Operational Environment, 2008*, a study authored by the U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM), said either Mexico or Pakistan were “worst case scenarios” for U.S. national security should either nation rapidly fail or collapse.<sup>2</sup>

### Tension on the Border

Violent deaths in Mexico nearly doubled in 2009 to just over 7,000, and the manner of death in some cases was especially gruesome.<sup>3</sup> Reports of brutality and emerging accounts of government corruption add to the negative popular perception of Mexico in the United States. Mexico appears capable of becoming a failed state where a destabilizing insurgency could potentially thrive.<sup>4</sup>

In March 2010, drug cartel gunmen assassinated U.S. consulate staff employees and their spouses in the presence of their children in the middle of the day as they left a consulate social event.<sup>5</sup> In response, the U.S. Secretaries of State, Defense, and Homeland Security joined the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of National Intelligence to conduct an impromptu cabinet-level visit with their Mexican counterparts to strengthen relationships and to ascertain how best to support the Mexican government's struggle with illicit drug organizations.

United States experts on Mexico and Latin America identify weaknesses in specific areas, but they clearly articulate exceptional strengths in others. For example, in her *Foreign Affairs* article, “The Real War in Mexico,” Shannon O’Neil, the director of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force on U.S. Policy for Latin America, declares that Mexico will not fail. Citing Mexico’s ability to meet the essential needs of its populace, hold free and fair elections, and exercise civilian political leadership control of the military, O’Neil recommends that the

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PHOTO: Special forces soldiers stand in front of a Mexican flag during a ceremony marking the second anniversary of the death of fallen soldier Angel Guadalupe Aguilar Villatoro in Tijuana, 15 October 2010. Aguilar Villatoro was killed during a shootout with gunmen in that border city. (AP Photo/Guillermo Arias)

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>MAR 2011</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Mexico: Failing State or Emerging Democracy?</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Army Combined Arms Center, Military Review, Truesdell Hall, 290 Stimson Ave., Unit 2, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 66027</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>10</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

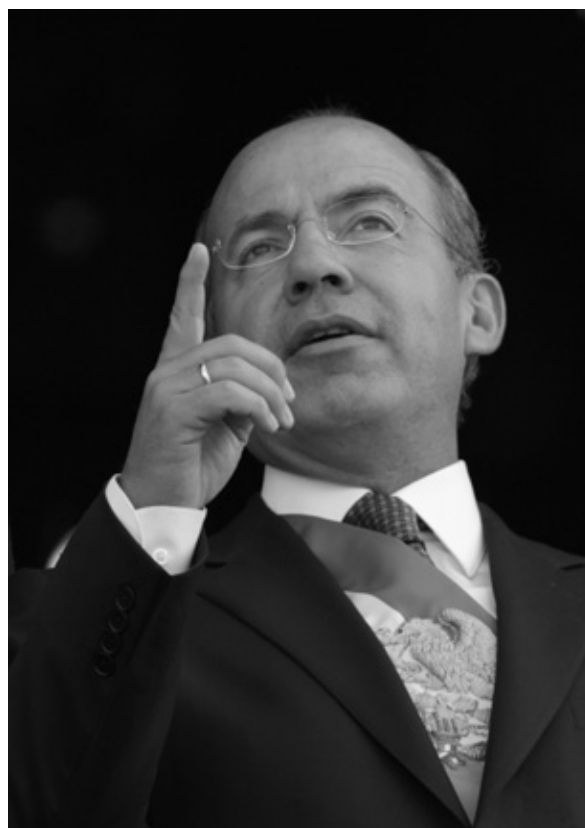
United States recognize Mexico as “a permanent strategic partner, rather than an often-forgotten neighbor.”<sup>6</sup> Many of O’Neil’s comments reflect the tensions between the two nations as artifacts of a long history of cooperation, competition and compromise, while significant amounts of literature, largely written by Mexican authors, plead for the United States to understand the conflicted relationship between the two nations.<sup>7</sup>

Is the increased cross-border criminal violence in Mexico evidence of impending state failure, or is it merely an unintended side effect of democratization? O’Neil claims that the current high level of violence reflects “an unintended side effect of democratization and economic globalization,” and not a signal for the eventual failure of Mexico as a nation-state.

The narco-criminal violence along the U.S.-Mexico border and within Mexico is the reaction of criminal organizations to President Calderón’s aggressive and intensifying counter-narcotic policies. Elected as an anti-corruption conservative, President Calderón continues to pursue policies that represent the will of the people expressed in free and fair elections. The voters chose from among multiple viable competing political parties, including one that reigned in Mexico for nearly seven decades. The empirical evidence, whether of an emerging democracy or of a declining nation-state, indicates that Mexico retains national durability and strength despite significant economic challenges that include a deteriorating security situation in some areas.

In *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, Robert Rotberg of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University posits that states are strong or weak “according to the levels of their effective delivery of the most crucial political goods.”<sup>8</sup> In hierarchical order, Rotberg’s criteria for determining the strength or weakness of states include the provision of security, the uniform application of the rule of law, the ability of the populace to participate in free and fair elections with the tolerance of divergent positions, and the provision of essential services such as education and medical aid.<sup>9</sup> The level at which states provide these political goods determines their “strength” or relative durability.

Assessing the presence of or lack of democracy highlights Samuel Huntington’s concepts of political modernization and adaptability as a



(AP Photo/Marco Ugarte)

**Mexico’s President Felipe Calderon attends a parade commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution in Mexico City’s Zocalo Plaza, 20 November 2010.**

rationalization of authority and the increased participation in politics of social groups throughout society.<sup>10</sup>

For seven decades since 1929, Mexican politics were dominated by The Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. Mexican politics largely resembled the subliminally oppressive conditions described by Marina Ottaway in *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Mexico endured what Samuel Huntington described as a one-party authoritarian regime whose success came from the consistent rotation of new leaders from conservative to progressive and back.<sup>12</sup> Huntington asserts that this rotation provided stability as tempered ambitions kept potential political opponents in line.

The center-right National Action Party, or PAN, established with the help of the very influential Roman Catholic Church, leveraged Mexican distrust for the PRI and campaigned for social and economic reform. The move towards the center-right reflected a resurgence of conservatism, both social and

economic, intended to thwart deteriorating security conditions. President Vincente Fox's election legitimized a multi-party at the national level. Mexico finally emerged as a truly democratic polity. The election exemplified what Huntington described as the central procedure of democracy, "the election of leaders through competitive election by the people governed."<sup>13</sup>

In the meantime, the United States focused on international terrorism after the September 11 attacks. It did not help that Fox openly disagreed with U.S. foreign policy and the war in Iraq. The United States did not put much effort or resources on the counter-narcotic strategic partnership with Mexico until the Merida Initiative became law in June of 2008. The Merida Initiative established a multi-year program with heavy investment in counter-drug forces, especially in Mexico. Congress approved funds targeted to support Mexico in its struggle against illegal drug organizations.<sup>14</sup> The United States held up recent payments because of alleged Mexican human rights violations, but resumed them once Secretary of State Hillary Clinton certified that human rights conditions met "acceptable" standards.<sup>15</sup>

Felipe Calderón took office in 2006 despite a disputed election fraught with claims of irregularities and alleged voter fraud.<sup>16</sup> Calderón vowed to win the war against drug trafficking and drug cartels and deployed over 35,000 Mexican Armed Forces troops to combat a threat to Mexican national stability.<sup>17</sup> The deployments placed tremendous strain on the Mexican military, which bears the burden of eradication, interdiction, and law enforcement operations while the Mexican Federal Police undergo reforms to reduce corruption and dysfunction.<sup>18</sup> The Mexican Army continues to enjoy the confidence of the population, but military operations, while marginally successful against the powerful drug cartels, have failed to change the tolerant mindset the disenfranchised and desperately poor have about illicit activities such as the drug trade.<sup>19</sup>

***Calderón declared war on drug trafficking and drug cartels...***

## **Security: The "Prime Function"**

Robert Rotberg identifies security as the primary political good that any government must provide to its people, calling it the state's "prime function."<sup>20</sup>

He defines security as the means to—

prevent cross-border invasions and infiltrations, and any loss of territory; to eliminate domestic threats to or attacks upon the national order and social structure; to prevent crime and any related dangers to domestic human security; and to enable citizens to resolve their differences with the state and with their fellow inhabitants without recourse to arms or other forms of physical coercion.<sup>21</sup>

By this definition, the sharp rise in criminal violence in the northern regions of Mexico and the border states of the United States indicates declining security conditions due to gangs, cross-border crime (i.e. smuggling, kidnapping, etc.), and transnational terrorism.

Often using mercenary paramilitary forces, competing drug cartels are waging a "narco-insurgency" on a national scale in large portions of rural Mexico's populated areas.<sup>22</sup> Motivated by greed, these opportunistic organizations take advantage of society's devolution into poverty by inserting large criminal systems that defy judicial authority. Elevated rates of recidivism reveal minimal deterrence of crime.<sup>23</sup> Declining social conditions indicate proxy governance by narco-criminal elements, at least at the regional or state level. These cartels have no interest in providing any essential services required by the people.

Gangs like Los Zetas are also a formidable paramilitary force threatening the stability of Mexico. They produce violent transnational terrorism and export it to the United States.<sup>24</sup> Los Zetas takes its name from the federal police radio code for the force pursuing Arturo Guzman Decenas, a lieutenant in the elite Army Airborne Special Forces Group, who deserted the Mexican military to protect the then-leader of the Gulf drug cartel, Osiel Cardenas Guillen.<sup>25</sup> Guzman and 30 commandos who joined in the desertion had received exceptional training from European nations, Israel, and U.S. Army Special Forces, making them superior to the federal police and the average Mexican soldier.<sup>26</sup> Better equipped



**Ruben Barragan Monterrubi, alias “El Montes,” is presented to the press at federal police headquarters in Mexico City, 2 December 2010. Accused of drug trafficking from Panama and the Dominican Republic to the United States, Barragan is an alleged member of the criminal organization, Los Zetas.**

and armed, the Zeta gang has access to large caliber automatic weapons, surface-to-air missiles, and high-tech communications equipment, while Mexican security forces have only austere capabilities.<sup>27</sup>

The Mexican Federal Police and the Mexican Army killed or arrested many of the original 31 Zetas, but younger, less well-trained members fill the gap. The gang employs ex-Kaibiles, elite Guatemalan Special Forces, to improve member training on tactics and weapons.<sup>28</sup> Their expertise in counterinsurgency tactics provide a kinetic advantage to the ruthless younger generation of Zetas, also known as “The New Zetas,” or “Nuevo Zetas.” With training bases across Mexico and Guatemala, the Nuevo Zetas proliferate nationally and internationally.<sup>29</sup>

The primary systemic weakness of Mexico is its inability to keep its citizens secure and exercise its authority over its sovereign territories. Nikos Passas, professor of criminology at Northeastern University, defines cross-border crime as “conduct

which jeopardizes the legally protected interests in more than one national jurisdiction and which is criminalized in at least one of the states/jurisdictions concerned.”<sup>30</sup> In describing this phenomenon, Passas includes terrorism along with the emerging crimes brought on by globalization.

We can discuss the metrics of troop/police deployments and mathematically measure murders, attacks, and other violence, but we cannot measure the psychological phenomenon. Do the people feel secure? Bruce Schneier, a leading expert on security, in his essay, “The Psychology of Security,” says there is a difference between feeling secure and actually being secure.<sup>31</sup> Polling conducted by Gallup Consulting in February 2009 indicated that Mexicans increasingly felt less secure.<sup>32</sup> Polling by MUND Americas in Mexico City also confirms this from a Mexican source.<sup>33</sup> Although most Mexicans have a highly unfavorable view of the cartels, they see their government as unable to do anything about them or illegal narcotic activity.



Those who believe that Mexico will fail argue that President Calderón's current counter-drug strategy actually triggered the displacement of malign actors throughout Mexico by aggravating the narcotics organizations. They contend Calderón caused the current eruption of violence because the displaced criminals are seeking to reestablish their operations, influence, and status. They now spread their illicit organizations into more remote ungoverned spaces, taking advantage of Mexico's porous northern border. They are also forming cross-border relationships with powerful drug networks in South America and distributors and "down-flow" actors supplying the high demand U.S. market.<sup>34</sup> Elaborate "third-generation" gang networks—which Max Manwaring, professor of military strategy at the U.S. Army War College, calls transnational criminal organizations—distribute, market, and sell illegal narcotics and export violence and intimidation as Mexican cartel satellites.<sup>35</sup>

Peter Andreas addresses the complex border security issue and the "loss-of-control narrative" in

*Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide*. He writes, "The stress on loss of control understates the degree to which the state has actually structured, conditioned, and even enabled (often unintentionally) clandestine border crossings, and overstates the degree to which the state has been able to control its borders in the past."<sup>36</sup>

Mexico's disproportionate distribution of wealth, high unemployment rate, and slow rate of growth of its gross domestic product are potential sources of instability.<sup>37</sup> Approximately 18 percent of Mexicans live in poverty in terms of access to food, while 47 percent live in poverty with respect to financial assets. Mexican citizens continue to look north for financial support and opportunity.<sup>38</sup> Although poverty does not cause people to engage in illicit activity, it helps explain why Mexican officials are apathetic about securing the northern border.

In summary, the Mexican state appears headed for further erosion, a general lack of security, an apathetic electorate, and weakening economic and government institutions. Mexico joins a community



U.S. Air Force, Master Sgt. Jerry Morrison

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a recent visit in Mexico City, Mexico, 23 March 2010. Secretary Gates along with Admiral Mullen and Secretary Clinton attended the Merida Initiative Plenary which focuses on helping the Mexican government fight drug-trafficking cartels and other security threats.

of nations, including the United States, with an ineffective sovereign border. The illicit community in Mexican society is hard to eliminate because it has tentacles that extend to legitimate businesses. The failure of Mexico to prevent, protect against, and prosecute crime threatens all citizens' security. Feelings of insecurity depress voter turnout, encourage political corruption, and discourage belief in democratic principles.

## State Strength

Mexico's primary strengths include a representative democracy capable of fair elections, an able and largely professionalized military/security force structure responsive to civilian authority, a judiciary that strives to implement the rule of law, and a stable economic infrastructure. Combined, these elements include aspects of each of Rotberg's "political goods" criteria for state strength.<sup>39</sup>

**Representative democracy.** Regarding a representative democracy capable of fair elections, Grayson articulates the intricate political maneuverings that achieve further differentiation and fractionalization of Mexican political parties.<sup>40</sup> However, this differentiation and fractionalization actually reflect symptoms of democratization inasmuch as they allow for the representation of diverging views without fear of retribution.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the development of the PAN—largely with the assistance of the Roman Catholic Church—and the subsequent election of Vicente Fox represented a desire by the Mexican people for a conservative-right, anti-corruption option with a renewed sense of hope for change. President Fox engendered an expanded economic globalization as well as anti-corruption initiatives intended to assuage the anger of those who elected him in 2000. The disputed elections of 2009, the representation of seven major political parties in the bicameral Mexican government, and openly contested local, provincial, and national level elections reflect both the necessary participatory elements of democratization and the essential political goods indicative of state strength.<sup>42</sup>

**Responsive security force.** As a capable and professional military/security force structure responsive to civilian constituted authority, the Mexican military has had a civil-military pact with the elected government of Mexico since the national rejection of post-revolutionary violence in

1946. Of the 20 Latin American nations, Mexico is the only one that did not suffer a military coup or takeover of government in the twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> The Mexican military and security forces—branches of the executive branch of government with a long tradition of domestic stabilization and an early history of political power—enjoy the respect of the people, institutionally professionalize, and respond to the constituted authority of elected civilian leaders. Underequipped and out-sourced, these forces struggle to establish control and achieve the delicate balance between policing a state and becoming a police state.

**Rule of law.** As a function of a bilateral security agreement with the United States, Mexico now extradites wanted narco-criminals for prosecution and subsequent incarceration. Calderón's decision to extradite these criminals was a significant departure from a longstanding precedent and demonstrates his willingness to support the U.S. National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy "building on ongoing cooperation and integrating efforts launched through the Merida Initiative."<sup>44</sup> Calderón proved his commitment to strategic success against the cartels by going so far as to extradite Mexican citizens to the U.S. judicial system. He continues to articulate an increasingly aggressive stance against the drug cartels despite the growing apprehension of the Mexican people.

Yet, according to Associated Press writer Alexandra Olson, "Mexico City's homicide rate today is about on par with Los Angeles and is less than a third of that for Washington, D.C."<sup>45</sup> In the past 10 years, Mexico's murder rate actually decreased. In fact, the murder rate per 100,000 citizens of Mexico is one third of other Latin American countries like Guatemala or Venezuela and only half that of Colombia. In the most recent global statistics, Mexico had 2.4 percent of total crime in the world while the United States accounted for 18.6 percent. In terms of murder, Mexico ranks sixth in the world after India, Russia, Colombia, South Africa, and the United States.<sup>46</sup> Luis de la Barra of the Citizen's Institute for Insecurity states, "We are like those women who aren't overweight, but when they look in the mirror, they think they're fat. We are an unsafe country, but we think we are much more unsafe than we really are."<sup>47</sup>

**Economical infrastructure.** Mexico is number 105 of 177 on the Foreign Policy and the Fund for Peace 2009 Failed State Index, rating better than nations such as Russia, Venezuela, China, Egypt, or Israel. (Using this index, the lower number a country rates, the more likely it is to become a failed state.)<sup>48</sup> When looking at the sub-areas studied within this index, Mexico appears in the best 33 percent of all measured nations regardless of the category, to include economic health, state legitimacy, public services, and the nation's security apparatus. Foreign Policy and the Fund for Peace recognizes some improvement in Mexico in the past three years.<sup>49</sup>

Mexico has the 12th largest world economy in terms of gross domestic product and purchasing power parity—just ahead of Spain, South Korea, and Canada—and is the second largest trade partner—just ahead of China and just behind Canada to the United States.<sup>50</sup> The World Bank ranks Mexico as the second largest economy in Latin America, after Brazil.<sup>51</sup> With \$1.4 trillion in gross domestic product, Mexico's economy falls just shy of California in purchasing power. These figures only account for the licit economic measures within the country. These indicators also

support the argument that Mexico enjoys relative stability macro-economically. The Mexican economy demonstrates durability, diversity, and resiliency as the second largest trading partner to the United States. Largely due to the ongoing efforts at globalization and in no small part due to previous free-trade status with the United States, the Mexican economy will achieve growth on pace or ahead of the United States. Wealth distribution inequities in Mexican society continue to produce internal tensions, but do not represent a threat to national economic progress.

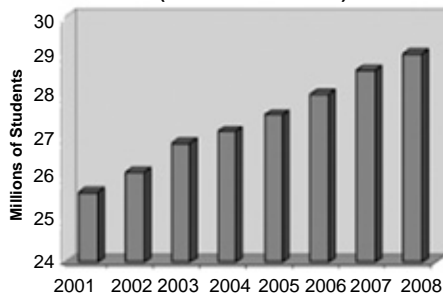
Concerning the delivery of other political goods and essential services, Mexico has improved in public education enrollment and overall health services. To address U.S. concerns about the strength and status of Mexico, the Mexican ambassador presented U.S. government officials a briefing entitled "Mexico and the Fight Against Drug-Trafficking and Organized Crime: Setting the Record Straight" in March of 2009 to illustrate Mexico's continued success in providing essential services to its people (see Figure 1).<sup>52</sup> The left side of the figure indicates the increased school enrollment of Mexican youth, while the graph on the right compares the life expectancy increase trend to the decreasing infant mortality rate.

## Failed State?

By all significant measures, Mexico has a functioning state. It does face major challenges in many issue areas, but the Mexican government has a clear and firm commitment to address them.

Mexico provides public education to almost 30 million people...

**MEXICO: PUBLIC EDUCATION ENROLLMENT**  
(millions of students)



Source: Ministry of Education

...and has experienced a steady improvement in health indicators

**MEXICO: HEALTH INDICATORS**



Source: INEGI

**Figure 1. Mexican public education and health indicators.**



**Reformed politics.** The Mexican political system reformed in 1989 at the end of what Huntington refers to as the “Third Wave of Democratization.”<sup>53</sup> The evolution of Mexican politics from a single-party system stemmed from electoral reforms that started in 1988 and involved the transparent financing of political parties.<sup>54</sup> In October of 1990, Mexico created the Federal Electoral Institute.<sup>55</sup> Theoretically, this oversight organization created the freeness and fairness necessary to achieve democratization. The institute is “in charge of organizing federal elections, that is, the election of President of the United Mexican States and Lower and Upper Chamber members that constitute the Union Congress.”<sup>56</sup>

The recent responsiveness of politicians in Mexico to the influences within the political environment, notably the electoral reformations, oversight institutions, emergence of national political parties, and social/religious actors, represents Mexican political adaptability. This adaptability reflects an evolution toward “political modernization.”<sup>57</sup> Fair elections are the most obvious advancement in the democratization process. Political leaders answerable to the population are the driving power behind President Calderón’s fight against the drug cartels.

## Opportunities for the Future

Mexico currently lacks the ability to prevent border infiltration, struggles to neutralize or eliminate the domestic criminal threat to its social structure, and cannot prevent violent crimes that endanger the security of many Mexicans. However, Mexican citizens can access the judicial system without threat of government reprisal. The Mexican judicial system enables citizens to resolve their differences without retribution or intimidation. Consistent with Rotberg’s concept of “predictable, recognizable, systematized methods of adjudicating disputes,” and enhanced by extradition to the U.S. judiciary, the Mexican judicial system continues to enforce a rule of law as an embodiment of the values of the people.<sup>58</sup>

Drug cartels permeate Mexican society with expanded international networks. The cartels operate among the Mexican people, but the people still regard the cartels negatively and try to rid society of opportunistic criminals. The violence

***The violence associated with drug crime in Mexico does not reflect an insurgency movement.***

associated with drug crime in Mexico does not reflect an insurgency movement.

Violence will likely increase as a reformist president stirs up proverbial hornets nests in certain regions of Mexico. Calderón’s “clear-hold-build” strategy continues to achieve results on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border, both in terms of captured or eliminated cartel members and in increased and successful prosecutions of narco-criminals, especially in the United States. Metrics of Calderón’s success or failure do not include the number of those killed in drug related crime. Rather, more appropriately, President Calderón’s measurement of success centers on his ability to convince both the Mexican people and the international community that his aggressive efforts will achieve a stable and secure environment within a highly competitive new media information environment rife with counter-messaging of instability, violence, and potential state failure.

Calderón’s close election demonstrated the cartels’ political strength as they strove to re-acquire positions of power within government. Calderón exerted even more pressure on the cartels after the election. This pressure caused cartels to react with both increased number and ferocity of attacks on citizens, police, soldiers, judges, and politicians.

Even though U.S. media, especially those from the border regions, used the spectacular nature of the deaths to agitate the U.S. citizenry to the point of contemplating Mexico as a failed state, Mexico exhibits all the necessary traits of a young and struggling democracy. However, without significant support, it could easily fall back into semi-authoritarian practices that would embolden and further enable cartels to operate beyond the influence of the Mexican government. However, a return to a semi-authoritarian or even an authoritarian government does not mean the state will fail.



U.S. Army, SFC Class Jon Soucy

**Army MG Peter Aylward, center, speaks with Arizona Army National Guard soldiers near Nogales, AZ, while visiting troops serving along the southwest border in support of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents, 13 September 2010.**

Over 400 cases of corruption within U.S. agencies have originated from the southwest border.<sup>59</sup> These officials, possibly beholden to Mexican cartels, stand accountable for their own actions. Likewise, the market for illegal drugs stems from a prevalent U.S. hunger for illegal substances. Most of the weapons used in narco-violence originate from the United States. Still, American citizens living in Washington, D.C., statistically and proportionately, are more likely to die from murder than a Mexican citizen.

The ongoing drug-related violence in the northern regions of Mexico and the southwest border regions of the United States indicate Mexican state weakness in the area of security, but falls well short of indicating that Mexico will fail. The violence epitomizes the will of the people carried out by a democratically elected government against the cartels. As the government continues to conduct aggressive counterdrug operations on behalf of the Mexican people, this violence will

also continue. Rather than representing a fragile or failing state, the current security conditions in Mexico are an opportunity for Mexico to become a strong democracy, a strategic regional partner, and an important economic ally to the United States. The amount of violence only indicates the amount of neglect and disregard for cartel proliferation during previous Mexican administrations.

Returning to Rotberg's criteria for determining the strengths of states based upon their ability to provide political goods, we can say that while Mexico struggles to provide security in large areas of the country, it does apply the rule of law, enables its citizens to participate in free and fair elections, and provides essential services to the population. It faces significant economic challenges, an ongoing struggle with transnational organized criminal organizations, and increasing voter apathy, but Mexico will not fail. To believe otherwise is to be myopic or biased, or fail to understand the real Mexico. **MR**

## NOTES

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40. Grayson further provides an elaborate play-by-play of political conditions to support his portrayal of Mexico as a fragile state. The final two chapters, "Chapter 10: Prospect for Mexico's Becoming a Failed State," and "Conclusion: Failed State?" attack the issue both from a sub-national and national perspective, 251-78.
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